

Avoiding Seven Deadly Multimedia Design and Presentation Sins

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Have you ever attended a lecture or conference presentation where the presenter project text material was unreadable to all but the people in the first few rows? Have you ever seen a World Wide Web page where the color combinations made your eyes cross? As I attended various professional conferences or browse through web pages, I pay attention to not only what is being presented, but also how it is presented. In this way, I get ideas to improve my own presentations; I also see many presentation sins.

Frankly, I have been guilty of every sin mentioned in this article, and I am occasionally tempted to backslide into some of them. Nevertheless, the first step in changing behavior is to recognize the problem. Some of these design and presentation sins can be committed with an overhead projector as well as with any computer-based multimedia, so ask yourself if you have committed any of them. Because the ideas in this article can be applied to a variety of presentation media, the term "Presentation" will be used generically, referring to overhead transparencies and computer presentations alike, whether the media are intended for individual viewing, such as web pages, or for large groups using a video projection system or large screen monitor.

Seven Common Presentation Sins and Their Ab-Solutions

Sin 1. Letter fonts are too ornate, or there are too many different fonts, styles, and font colors in a single presentation.

Ab-Solutions: Avoid the temptation to use fancy fonts, and instead choose one that is easy to read. Just because your computer has 100 fonts and can show millions of colors doesn't mean that you should use them all in one presentation. Limit a presentation to one or two letter fonts, styles and/or font colors. Be consistent in how to use them, such as to show captions, headings, subheadings, and so on. If you feel compelled to use an ornate font, use it only with a few words and be careful to use it appropriately. For example, do not use all capital letters with a font such as Old English, which required mixed upper and lower letters for eligibility.

Sin 2. Font sizes and/or graphics are too small.

Ab-Solutions: Sometimes the default font sizes in presentation software are too small for people in a small room to read, so do not rely on defaults. Plan your screens or transparencies so that people in the back row can easily read the smallest lines of text and clearly see all of the graphics.

Sin 3. The background is too "busy" and/or the background and text color combinations do not have enough contrast for legibility.

Ab-Solutions: Make sure that any designs and colors in the background do not conflict with the text, and that the background and text adequately contrast each other, such as dark background with light text or vice versa. Avoid the color red for text. Red text can be difficult to read, and many people are color blind to red.

Sin 4. Crowding too much information onto a single screen or transparency.

Ab-Solutions: Keep screens simple and clear. Do not crowd text, but allow plenty of line spacing and generous margins. Use short phrases and key words, or break large blocks of text into several screens. In a face-to-face presentation, you will appear to be in command of your subject if you give more information as you speak than appears on the screen. Using key words will also help you to avoid reading the screen to, your audience. For a large group presentation, whether you are using overhead transparencies or a computer presentation, follow the six-by-six rule of thumb: Generally, no more than six lines of text per screen and no more than six words per line. Pretend that you are paying six dollars for every word you use. The temptation to reduce the font size is usually a signal that you are trying to put too much on one screen

Sin 5. Leaving a screen unchanged for too long or not leaving a screen up long enough for the audience to take notes.

Ab-solutions: Create suspense and interest by using the Layer or Build feature in presentation software, or overlays on a transparency, to screen for a while, insert a blank background into your presentation sequence, or turn the overhead projector off, so the audience will focus attention on you. With presentation software, you can use the handout feature to provide screen information to the audience so they will not need to copy it.

Sin 6. Overusing special effects.

Ab-Solutions: With presentation software, be consistent in the use of special effects, such as text flying in, dissolving, and so on. Do not use too many different effects because the audience may become more interested in what the text special effect will be than in your message.

Sin 7- Presentation is all text, no pictures.

Ab-Solutions: Don't forget that computer presentations and transparencies are visual media. Too much text can be boring. Use pictures, charts, graphs and cartoons to illustrate ideas and to add interest.

Certainly there are **more** than just seven **sins** that can be committed while designing and presenting instructional multimedia. The preceding sins are committed when the equipment is working. Another sin might be the over dependence on computer technology. We have probably all attended, and perhaps delivered, presentations plagued by technical difficulties.

First, if you must use a computer and video projector or LCD plate for your presentation, you should know how to set up the equipment yourself, and, if possible, test it on location before you do the presentation. Take a run-time or Player version of the presentation software with you for an off-campus presentation so that you are not dependent on event organizers for supplying you with the correct version of your software. New software versions will usually play presentations created with older versions, but not vice versa.

Second, you should have a backup plan in case of complete equipment or software failure. If this happens, do not spend more than five minutes of your presentation time trying to make the equipment work. Apologize to the audience **ONCE**, but then take care to avoid the statement, "if the equipment were working, we could show you . . . " The audience is already keenly aware of the fact, so it is better to just go on with a discussion of your ideas and do your best to describe what they would have seen. If you want to be better prepared for such disasters, you should provide handouts from the software that show in miniature what is on the screen, or if you must have an on-screen presentation, such as for a very large audience, prepare overhead

transparencies or 35mm slides and have a projector handy as a backup for your presentation. Be sure to test the backup equipment to make sure it is working, too!

In summary, as you design and prepare your presentation media, whether you will use overhead transparencies, 35mm slides, presentation software, or the web, keep in mind that your audience and the situation in which they will view the

presentation. Carefully consider your layout and your use of letter fonts, styles, sizes, colors, backgrounds, and images. Clarity should be your priority; then go ahead and make it pretty.

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